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ABSTRACT

This brochure explains the process of higher education accreditation and describes the role of various institutions in accreditation. Organizations that accredit entire institutions are called institutional accrediting organizations; those that evaluate free-standing professional or occupational schools or are limited to specific programs within an institution of higher education are called specialized accrediting organizations. The Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools is one of six regional accrediting organizations in the United States, each responsible for a specific geographic area. These regional accrediting associations accredit entire institutions, rather than specific programs. The work of the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools is described through a series of commonly asked questions with answers. These question and answer discussions cover such things as standards an institution must meet to be accredited and accreditation procedures, with descriptions of appeal processes should accreditation be denied or lost. Contact information is given for other regional accrediting associations. (SLD)

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WHAT IS ACCREDITATION?

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Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools
COMMISSION ON HIGHER EDUCATION

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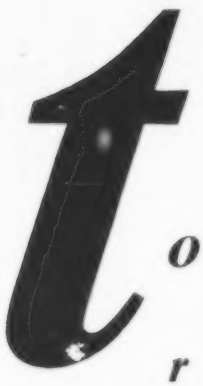

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CHE
MSA

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www.msache.org

The Middle States Commission on Higher Education receives numerous inquiries from the public about colleges and universities. Questions come from employers, professional associations, parents, students, prospective students, governmental agencies, newspaper reporters, and many others. We usually are able to answer these questions—except when:

- the questions involve issues that fall outside the purposes of accreditation and, in some cases, should be addressed to other organizations; or
- individuals seek information that can be obtained only from the institution itself.

This pamphlet clarifies the types of information and assistance that are available from the Commission.

Sincerely,

Jean Avnet Morse

Jean Avnet Morse
Executive Director

sampling of questions addressed to Commission staff

The Commission receives such varied questions that it is possible to provide only a small sampling in this brief pamphlet.

The following examples illustrate some of the most frequently asked questions.

What is Accreditation?

Accreditation is a means of self–regulation and peer review adopted by the educational community.

The accrediting process is intended to strengthen and sustain the quality and integrity of higher education, making it worthy of public confidence. The extent to which each educational institution accepts and fulfills the responsibilities inherent in this process is a measure of its concern for freedom and quality in higher education and of its commitment to strive for and achieve excellence in its endeavors.

Accreditation is a voluntary process. Institutions choose to apply for accredited status. Once accredited, they agree to abide by the standards of their accrediting organization and to regulate themselves by taking responsibility for their own improvement.

In addition, the federal government requires that an institution be accredited by a nationally recognized accrediting organization in order for its students to be eligible to participate in the Student Assistance Programs in Title IV of the Higher Education Act, as amended (HEA).

In the Middle States region, accreditation is an expression of the confidence of the Commission on Higher Education in an institution's mission and goals, its performance, and its resources. Based upon the results of an institutional self-study and an evaluation by a team of peers assigned by the Commission, accreditation attests to the judgment

of the Commission that an institution has met the following criteria:

- that it is guided by well-defined and appropriate goals;
- that it has established conditions and procedures under which its goals can be realized;
- that it is accomplishing its goals substantially;
- that it is so organized, staffed, and supported that it can be expected to continue to accomplish its goals; and
- that it meets the standards of the Commission on Higher Education of the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools.

Is Institutional Accreditation Different from Specialized Accreditation?

Organizations which accredit entire institutions are called institutional accrediting organizations. Those which evaluate free-standing professional or occupational schools or are limited to specific programs within an institution of higher education are called specialized accrediting organizations. The most widely known institutional accreditors are the regional accrediting associations, such as the Middle States Commission on Higher Education. They examine all of the educational programs at an institution as well as such areas as student services, financial condition, and administrative effectiveness.

The Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools is one of six regional accrediting associations in the United States, each responsible for a specific geographic area. Within these six associations, there are eight commissions serving postsecondary education.

Regional accrediting associations accredit institutions as a whole, not specific programs. Specific programs are reviewed as part of the evaluation of an entire institution, and such programs are covered by institutional accreditation.

There are also national accrediting organizations which are both institutional and specialized in character.

There are numerous other specialized accrediting organizations, which are national in scope, that accredit particular programs within a college or university. Some institutions choose to seek additional recognition from these organizations, whose evaluations often are closely linked to professional associations, such as those for engineering, law, medicine, library science, journalism, or nursing.

About the Middle States Association and the Commission on Higher Education

The Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools (MSA), established in 1887, is a nonprofit, membership association, dedicated to educational improvement through evaluation and accreditation.

MSA members are located in Delaware, the District of Columbia, Maryland, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands. MSA members also include several free-standing American-style institutions abroad that are chartered in one of the states in our region.

MSA activities are carried out by three commissions, which work with institutions at different levels: the Commission on Higher Education, Commission on Secondary Schools, and Commission on Elementary Schools.

While the three Commissions function independently of each other, the Commission on Elementary Schools and the Commission on Secondary Schools jointly conduct a protocol for the accreditation of K–12 schools. However, accreditation decisions and policies relating to MSA members that are institutions of higher education are made only by the Commission on Higher Education.

The Commission on Higher Education (CHE), established in 1919, has several purposes: 1) to evaluate institutions of higher education, based on standards developed by the colleges and universities in our membership; 2) to accredit those institutions which meet the standards for accreditation; 3) to assist institutions in as many ways as possible to improve their programs and services; and 4) to work closely with other organizations in promoting educational improvement.

Who Carries Out the Commission's Work?

The work of the Middle States Commission on Higher Education is accomplished by the following groups:

Members of the Commission

The Commission on Higher Education consists of 24 members who are elected by the colleges and universities that are members of the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools. The president of the Board of Trustees of the Middle States Association is *ex officio* one of the 24 members of the Commission on Higher Education.

These members of the Commission are all volunteers, and they are responsible for making decisions on the accreditation of institutions and for formulating Commission policies.

Peer Evaluators

Institutions are evaluated for accreditation or reaccreditation by a team of evaluators from similar colleges and universities, who usually have expertise in the specific areas that will be the focus of an institution's evaluation. Evaluators typically are selected from within the region, but sometimes it is necessary to seek expertise from outside the region. These teams of volunteers conduct site visits and perform other tasks, such as reading reports and making special visits.

Commission Staff

The staff are full-time personnel who carry out the Commission's daily operations. For example, staff coordinate all accreditation procedures, monitor changes at each institution, and provide information and technical assistance to institutions.

Speakers and Panelists

The Commission also conducts workshops for representatives from institutions that are preparing for various aspects of the accreditation process. These tend to be training-type sessions on specific topics. In addition, there are symposia and conferences, which usually are professional development opportunities on more general topics in higher education relating to accreditation. There are also occasional forums which are open to the general public on current issues that may have an impact on the accreditation of institutions of higher education.

The presenters, panelists, and other guest speakers at these events are volunteers who have special expertise in the subjects being discussed, and their role is to assist the Commission in its mission to improve higher education in the region.

What Standards Must an Institution Meet to be Accredited?

All accredited institutions possess important common attributes which are characteristics of excellence, although all institutions do not possess all of the attributes in equal proportion. These characteristics are the standards by which the Commission on Higher Education determines an institution's accreditation.

Before an institution can receive its initial accreditation, it also must meet the Commission's basic eligibility requirements, which are explained in the publication *Candidacy for Accreditation.* Included among these is the requirement that the institution have the legal authority and state approval to operate and confer degrees. Each state has regulations which set minimum standards that are designed to protect consumers.

The "Standards for Accreditation" are developed by the membership and approved by both the Commission and member institutions. However, some of these standards exist because of federal requirements. For the full text of the booklet explaining each of the standards, you may order a copy of *Characteristics of Excellence in Higher Education.*

The Middle States Commission on Higher Education sets its standards above the minimum federal and state requirements, expecting and encouraging institutions to improve their effectiveness and to work continuously toward the highest possible level of educational excellence.

How Often is a College or University Evaluated?

Colleges and universities in the Middle States region normally are evaluated every five years, but Commission staff members also monitor each institution to determine if special circumstances require more frequent evaluations.

The most comprehensive evaluation occurs approximately every 10 years after an institution is initially accredited. It is based upon a report that the institution prepares about itself, called a self-study report.

Five years after the decennial visit, there is a second evaluation, which is based upon a Periodic Review Report (PRR). The PRR is a restrospective, current, and prospective analysis of an institution since its last evaluation. It includes a description of how the institution responded to any recommendations made by the institution in its own self-study report, by the visiting team that evaluated the institution, and by the Commission.

How Does the Commission Determine If an Institution Meets Accreditation Standards?

The Commission determines that an institution meets accreditation standards based on evidence that is presented in materials offered by the institution in its self-study process, and this

evidence must be validated by educators from other institutions during the peer review process.

Through the self-study process, an institution first evaluates itself to determine how well it is meeting its own goals and the Commission's standards. A cross–section of the campus community is expected to participate in this process, which results in a detailed report called a self-study report.

Through peer review, the Commission appoints a team of experts from similar colleges and universities to evaluate the institution. This team of evaluators, led by a team Chair, reads the self-study report and other background materials, and visits the institution to gather additional information and perspectives from faculty, staff, students, administrators, and community members.

The team Chair summarizes the team's findings in a written team report, which assesses whether the institution is meeting (1) its own mission and goals, as described in the institution's self-study and (2) Commission standards, as described in *Characteristics of Excellence*. The Chair also prepares a separate document, called the "Chair's Brief," which is addressed only to the Commission on Higher Education. The brief summarizes the mmain points in the team report and makes a formal, confidential recommendation on the institution's accreditation.

A committee of the Commission reviews the self-study report, the team report, the Chair's brief, and the institution's response to the written team report and makes a recommendation to the full Commission. The Commission discusses the

institution and takes an official action. This action may be one of several outlined in the policy statement, "Range of Commission Actions on Accreditation."

One of these actions may require the institution to complete some form of follow-up activity, which may be followed by a written report to the Commission and sometimes an abbreviated form of peer review, carried out by a small visiting team.

In the period between evaluation visits, special circumstances may arise which result in more frequent evaluations. For example, major changes at an institution can affect its daily operations, and institutions sometimes create programs at a new degree level, establish branch campuses, or offer degree programs through non-traditional methods of delivery. Commission staff review these institutional changes and consider what level of peer review may be appropriate.

Do Institutions Ever Lose Accreditation?

Yes. When an institution fails to meet Commission standards, the Commission may decide to defer a decision on an institution's accreditation, providing an opportunity for the institution to correct its problems within a limited period of time.
The Commission also may take other steps, which are described in the policy statement, "Range of Commission Actions." These steps include warning an institution that its accreditation may be in jeopardy, placing an institution on probation, or requiring an institution to show cause why its

accreditation should not be removed. Institutions have the right to appeal an adverse Commission decision, and the institution retains its accredited status during the appeal process.

Are Distance Learning Programs and Courses Accredited?

Distance learning programs and courses are not separately accredited by the Commission on Higher Education. However, they may be included within the scope of an institution's existing accreditation. The Commission publishes a policy statement and guidelines for distance learning programs to assist institutions when they are considering and developing distance learning programs. When an institution plans to offer at least 50 percent of a program through distance learning, it must receive advance approval from the Commission to have those programs included within the scope of the institution's accreditation. To identify institutions that offer degrees via distance learning, consult a commercial directory that may be available at your local bookseller or library.

Does the Commission Rank Colleges?

No. American colleges and universities are so varied in their purposes, types of programs offered, and students served that it is not possible to offer a valid general ranking of institutions based on educational quality.

While accreditation does not provide a basis for ranking institutions of higher education, it does seek to strengthen and sustain the quality and integrity of institutions. In each instance, a college or university is judged by how effectively it meets its stated mission and the Commission's standards.

Can the Commission Recommend a College or University?

No. The selection of a college is an individual decision, based on each student's needs, interests and goals. There are so many different types of institutions (small, large, urban, rural, public, private, church–related, career–oriented, etc.) that matching the student's interest and abilities to the characteristics of a college requires detailed information about the student.

Information about colleges is found in various reference books and directories, which are available in many libraries. Students also are advised to consult with counselors or advisors in secondary schools, consult the admissions officers at colleges in which they are interested, and visit the campus.

What Kinds of Information Does the Commission Provide about Institutions?

A list of accreditation actions taken by the Commission at its most recent meeting may be found in the newsletter, *CHE Letter*. The Commission also provides a "Statement of Accreditation Status" (SAS) for each institution, which is available upon written request. The SAS includes such information as: the date of next scheduled review; the date of and reasons for the most recent Commission action, including any steps the institution is required to take as follow-up to peer evaluation; if an institution has chosen to appeal a decision by the Commission, the date of and reasons for the appeal; and the date of any withdrawal of accreditation and the reasons for this action.

More detailed information about the most recent accreditation review may be found in the institution's self-study and the evaluation team report. Individuals wishing to have access to these documents should contact the institution directly; the Commission itself does not release the self-study and team report.

Individuals who seek information about internal matters at a college or university, such as personnel issues, are encouraged to contact the institution itself. The Middle States Commission on Higher Education will not respond to concerns that are not clearly related to the Commission's standards.

Will a College Accept Credits Transferred from Another College?

Each institution makes its own decisions about transfer credits, and it may take into account a variety of factors, such as how well the credits students earned at another institution fit the requirements for the program they wish to pursue, the grades students received in the courses they took, whether the college they attended is accredited, and other factors that vary from one institution to another.

The only way to determine which credits (if any) a college or university will accept is to contact the institution directly. Students who know in advance that they may wish to transfer to another institution should contact the receiving institution as soon as possible about the transferability of credits.

For further information about transfer, consult the Commission's policy, "Transfer and Articulation."

What Happens to Student Records When a College Closes?

The closing institution arranges with the state department of higher education or other appropriate agency to file all academic records as well as financial aid information. If the college merges with another institution, arrangements are made with that institution to receive the records. Students

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receive a notice from the college about any arrangements made for filing student records.

Sometimes students wish to know about where their records are filed, long after an institution has closed. In that case, students should begin their inquiries by contacting the higher education agency in the state where the institution was authorized.

Does the Commission Handle Complaints or Other Grievances against Institutions?

The Commission receives complaints about substantive matters that are related to the institution's ability to meet the Commission's standards for accreditation as defined in *Characteristics of Excellence*.

Complaints must be written, signed, and addressed to the executive director of the Commission. However, the Commission investigates these complaints only when the complainant has exhausted all of the institution's appeal procedures. For more information, see the Commission's policy statement, "Review of Complaints Involving Affiliated Institutions."

The Middle States Commission on Higher Education will address concerns that are clearly related to an accreditation action taken by the Commission. However, the Commission is not a judicial or quasi-judicial body, and therefore it cannot settle disputes between individuals and institutions, whether these involve students,

faculty, administration, or members of other groups. Examples of these would be a student's complaint about a grade received from a faculty member or a faculty member's complaint about his or her hiring or continued employment.

How are Complaints against the Commission Handled?

Individuals or institutions that have complaints against the Commission itself should contact the appropriate federal or state agencies listed in this publication. Complaints also may be addressed to the Council for Higher Education Accreditation, a non-governmental organization which recognizes accrediting organizations.

Other Regional Commissions

The Commission on Higher Education, Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools, is one of eight regional accrediting commissions responsible for accrediting postsecondary institutions. The other commissions are:

New England Association of Schools and Colleges

www.neasc.org/

Commission on Institutions of Higher Education
209 Burlington Road, Bedford, MA 01730–1433
Telephone: (781) 271–0022
Fax: (781) 271–0950
Dr. Charles M. Cook, Director

Commission on Technical and Career Institutions
Telephone: (617) 271–0022
Fax: (781) 271–0950
Dr. Richard E. Mandeville, Director

North Central Association of Colleges and Schools

www.ncacihe.org

Commission on Institutions of Higher Education
30 North LaSalle Street, Suite 2400,
Chicago, IL 60602
Telephone: (800) 621–7440
Fax: (312) 263–7462
Dr. Steven D. Crow, Executive Director

Northwest Association of Schools and Colleges

Commission on Colleges

11130 NE 33rd Place, Bellevue, WA 98004

Telephone: (425) 827–2005

Fax: (425) 827–3395

Dr. Sandra E. Elman, Executive Director

Southern Association of Colleges and Schools

www.sacs.org

Commission on Colleges

1866 Southern Lane, Decatur, GA 30033–4097

Telephone: (800) 248–7701 or (404) 679–4512

Fax: (404) 679–4558

Dr. James T. Rogers, Executive Director

Western Association of Schools and Colleges

www.wascweb.org

Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges

3402 Mendocino Avenue, Santa Rosa, CA 95403

Telephone: (707) 569–9177

Fax: (707) 569–9179

Dr. David B. Wolf, Executive Director

Accrediting Commission for Senior Colleges and Universities

C/o Mills College, Box 9990, Oakland, CA 94613–0990

Telephone: (510) 632–5000

Fax: (510) 632–8361

Mr. Ralph A. Wolff, Executive Director

State Agencies

Delaware

Delaware Higher Education Commission
Carvel State Office Building
820 N. French Street
Wilmington, DE 19801
(302) 577–3240

District of Columbia

Office of Postsecondary Education Research and Assistance
2100 Martin Luther King Jr. Ave., SE, Suite 401
Washington, DC 20020
(202) 727–3688

Maryland

Maryland Higher Education Commission
16 Francis Street, Annapolis, MD 21401
(410) 974–2971

New Jersey

New Jersey Commission on Higher Education
20 West State Street, CN 542, Trenton, NJ 08625
(609) 292–4310

New York

New York State Education Department
Cultural Education Center, Rm 5B28
Albany, NY 12230
(518) 474–5851

Pennsylvania

Pennsylvania Department of Education
333 Market Street, 12th Floor
Harrisburg, PA 17126–0333
(717) 787–5041

Puerto Rico

Puerto Rico Council on Higher Education
P. O. Box 19900
San Juan, PR 00910–1900
(787) 724–7100

U.S. Virgin Islands

Department of Education
44–46 Kongens Gade
St. Thomas, USVI 00802
(787) 774–8315

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